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THE PRESENT CRISIS.

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A SPEECH

DELIVERED BY

DR. GEO. B. LORING,

— AT —

LYCEUM HALL, SALEM,

WEDNESDAY EVENING, APRIL 26, 1865.

ON THE ASSASSINATION OF

PRESIDENT LINCOLN.

DR. LORING'S LETTER TO THE SALEM GAZETTE, ON

RECONSTRUCTION.

—
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L. B. MCGOWAN
MAY 5 1968

THE PRESENT CRISIS.

My Friends and Fellow-Citizens:

I accepted the invitation to respond to the resolutions which have just been offered to the meeting, not supposing that I should be the first one called upon to make remarks in concurrence with their tone and tenor. I imagined that I should first hear from some of those whose views are a little more familiar to you than mine ~~in~~ in the discussions of the questions of this hour. I find myself laboring under difficulties, having my thoughts somewhat deranged, and my mind somewhat appalled by the magnitude of the great crisis which rests upon our land. Why, my friends, when I consider the wickedness which prompted this rebellion, the sophistries and arguments by which its authors sought to defend it, the extraordinary doctrines which they charged upon the Revolutionary fathers, I am shocked beyond expression, at this last great tragedy, the fruit of our past history, and my mind is broken down by the magnitude of our national woe.

Let us look back for a moment. Do you suppose that when Washington and Jefferson, and Madison and Hamilton, and Jay and Adams, and their great compatriots secured our freedom by the sword and wrought out our constitution by their great intellects, do you suppose they imagined that the great rights and privileges, which they conferred upon us to be perpetuated by all peaceful endeavor, would demand of us such a fearful sacrifice of blood, in order that their desire for freedom might be accomplished? Do you imagine that when the Declaration of Independence laid down the great truth that "all men are born free and equal," its authors and defenders reserved to themselves the right to prove that this profoundly humane doctrine is false? Do you suppose that it ever occurred to them, when they gave to the states and to individual powers liberty under the constitution, that such liberty would be used for the purpose of tearing down that constitution and deluging the land with blood? Do you conceive for a moment, that that great system of government devised by them, was not a government before which you and I as individuals, and all these clustering states, must bow in humble submission to the law? Never for a moment. On the contrary their dream was of a perpetual government, confirmed and strengthened as time went on, the work of a long era of peace. They supposed that before a half century should have passed away, this whole land would be

the abode of freedom, and constitutional rights from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from the lakes to the Gulf. It was written in all letters and documents that emanated from their hands, and in all their debates. That new-born doctrine that "slavery is the corner-stone of the republic,"—do you find it acknowledged anywhere, by the fathers? Has it been written down by them? Can you find it in any letter of Washington or Jefferson or Franklin or Adams, in any debate, or in any message to Congress? Did they ever entertain the thought of engraving slavery upon this land, so firmly that it should be a lasting institution? Had they done this in the beginning, where would have been our Republic? Stricken down by the hand of men before it had passed its pupilage, crushed by the hand of God before it had been born!

And now, my friends, here we are. After having been born and educated for the purposes of peace and freedom, and equality, we find ourselves with a great record of blood written upon our history, such a record of blood as the world has never seen, and such as for atrocity on one side, the civilized ages have never known. We have been compelled to wade through seas of blood for the cause of humanity and good government; and when the great object of the war was on the verge of being accomplished, the best and dearest blood in the whole land is shed to seal the future of the American people. Before the great national barbarism and wrong we as a people have bowed in agony, and our President has laid down his life, the last as he is the greatest martyr in the cause of the American Independence. (Applause.)

My friends, your resolutions refer tenderly and affectionately to him, whose enviable lot it was, to be elected of all men upon the earth, by the American people to lead them through this great struggle, this great contest, and then to be elected of God to rise into heaven, to immortalize his work and take his seat by the side of the Father of his Country. It is no idle word to say, that when the name of Washington may be forgotten, perhaps unknown in many an humble heart, when the victories of the battle-field shall have passed from the memory of men, it will be recorded and remembered forever of Abraham Lincoln, that he laid down his life for universal freedom. (Applause.) This did not Washington. Alone of all men, did our late President, as a leader of the people, lay down his life for the freedom of the down trodden and lowly. His lot is indeed enviable, destined as he was by God to go on step by step, until this great chapter in our history shall be recorded as his.

He seemed to be guided by instinct, and yet he had great wisdom. We all know he had a kind and generous heart, and his enemies came to know it too. He was not a great statesman, for he had not been educated as such; he was not a great lawyer, for his professional career was spent in the inferior courts of Illinois; he was not a great scholar, for books had been but a small part of his early possessions; he was not a great warrior, for he had no experience on the battle-field, no culture in military schools, but he was a great man—a great man—able to grapple with any subject that rose before him, and to deal with it according to the exigencies of the times. Mark how he

went through all those troubles. He began no wiser than you or I. He declared to congress that this war was not for the extinction of slavery, and he never conceived in the outset that this was a war for emancipation. Was it not a great deed, therefore, when the conservative forces of the country stood trembling, when we were told that bankruptcy would fall upon us, that anarchy and ruin would overspread the land, and servile insurrection would lay waste one half of the republic, was it not a great deed for him to obey the largest impulses of his nature, and in an hour to change his convictions and come boldly and uncompromisingly up to the principle, that this land should be free so far as his proclamation could make it free? Yes, my friends, it was a great deed—greater than lawyers do,—your Websters and your Choates, great as they are—a greater deed than is done in your courts—a greater deed than Generals do—a greater deed than politicians generally do. (Applause.) And it was because, while all the responsibility and the consequences rested upon him, he rose above the surrounding level, and made that declaration of freedom, that he made himself truly great.

I said he was kind-hearted; and you know there are many men abroad in this land, pursuing their peaceful avocations, through the forbearance of Abraham Lincoln, who by their own showing are entitled to a life-punishment in the penitentiary. And you know, and I know, that when those men who had undertaken to destroy the government, and had deluged this land in blood, came forward but half-penitent, half-clothed in sackcloth and ashes for their sins, his arms were ever open to receive them, and no bosom was broader than his. My friends, his clemency was his danger. And now that he has laid down his life, let us remember that danger and be warned by it. (Great applause.) I insist upon it that the great end for which this war has been fought, the great business of his life, will never be accomplished by what is usually called clemency—mercy not directed by justice. (Applause.) If, after having done his duty so faithfully in this life, he has, by his blood, cemented the hearts of the American people and enlightened their minds in the work of elevating and purifying the land, this last act is his greatest. He dreaded assassination, he was aware that plots were laid for his life, yet he went steadily and truly on with his work even to the laying down of his life in the cause, until by his death he has taught us a lesson greater and nobler than any President living could give.

I know I used a strong expression when I said we must beware of clemency. I do not desire vengeance. I would not have the North imitate the example of those who dishonored our noble dead, and starved our imprisoned soldiers to decimate our armies. I would not have a free and gallant people vengeful and blood-thirsty—but I would have them just, prudent and wise. Can not we add wisdom to prudence, and accord strict justice to those who have taken up arms against our government? Shall we restore them to the fullness of their former rights? Never. They have taken their chances, and now let them abide by the result. (Great applause.) They have declared that they were independent, now let them remain independent. (Applause.) The world is wide, and all lands, and all oceans, and the islands of the sea are open to receive them. (Applause—amen.) Some of them have

taken care to provide the necessary comforts for their journey. (Laughter.) And what a contrast we have before us—your eulogized and sainted President, known through all the world as the friend of freedom and a free government, who has written his name among the stars—and his opponent flying in the darkness before an indignant people, branded and despised, bearing his ill-gotten treasure if possible to that safety which a foreign land alone can give him, an outlaw and fugitive. What a contrast—the one a martyr in heaven—the other a felon sunk into the lowest pit of infamy on earth. (Applause.) This, my friends, impersonates the contest which has been going on between slavery and freedom. In the history of Abraham Lincoln I read the refulgence of American freedom—in the history of the great leader of the rebellion, I read the fate of American slavery—sunk to that lower deep which the imagination of man alone has reached.

I now desire to say a word upon the matter of reconstruction, but I fear I may weary you. (Go on, go on.) In all this question of reconstruction there is but one star that should guide us—and that star is the largest and broadest truth laid down and defended by Abraham Lincoln—the star he has set in the firmament of our heavens. We must not be led away from the issue, either by the blandishments of our foes or by our desire for peace. The American people must have the great principle of human freedom established, and they will never be satisfied until this is done, war or no war. (Great applause.) Starting from this point, from this great principle, I insist upon it *that it is impossible to treat with traitors who have taken up arms against this government, for the express purpose of blasting it and all hopes of freedom with it.* We cannot restore our government in this way. I feel it to be impossible, and would never, so long as I had the power of an American citizen, I would never agree to the restoration of the old state organizations among the revolted states, or to any state governments manufactured for the occasion. I would as soon invite Jefferson Davis to come to Washington and take his seat by the side of President Johnson, as I would allow Extra Billy Smith to reorganize the state government of Virginia. So I say of all the states which have destroyed their “practical relations” to the general government by rebellion. When *all the citizens* of a state reach that point at which they are ready to return, upon the basis of government which the war has made for us all, let them return. But not until this is accomplished—not until free suffrage is established—not until the institutions of these states conform to the highest civilization of the land—would I place them on an equality with the loyal states. No twelve nor twelve thousand men in any state can do this—but a free people regenerated by the efforts of the general government. Until this is done how can members of Congress be returned, whose principles shall render them fit to sit by the side of men from Massachusetts? (Great applause. Hurrah.)

I asked a distinguished Republican leader not long ago—what benefit could be derived from the admission of such men as Brown of Mississippi and Cobb of Georgia, and Clay of Alabama once more on the floor of Congress, or others just like them—a result very likely to follow the sudden reorganization of these states, on the plan proposed in Louisiana. How

could these men deal justly with the great questions growing out of the war? How could they aid in adjusting the great troubles which they have created? "They would come but once," was his reply. That once is too much. The work of freedom must be accomplished without and in spite of them. No oath of allegiance can purify them. Our country—the civilized world, does not want their counsels. Their return would be an eternal disgrace to us. It would humiliate us in the eyes of all foreign powers. It would bring back all our controversy, paralyze all our efforts, overthrow all that we have accomplished, disonor the white man, and enslave the black man. The freemen of the North and the bondmen of the South protest against it. May we forever avoid this snare. (Applause.)

Now, what is there on the other side? It is simply this. I would hold the revolted states by the power of the Federal authority,—that power which we have strengthened and confirmed by this war. The first gun fired at Sumter knocked down the institution of slavery, and dispelled forever all the fallacies and sophistries accumulated for years under the names of State Rights and State Sovereignty. I do not mean any invasion of the legitimate rights of a state,—but of that superlative folly which has been represented by the flag of South Carolina and the sacred soil of Virginia. The Federal authority has now become powerful, and is the supreme power in the land. When the revolted states are ready to recognize that authority, when they are ready to bear their proportion of the national debt, when they are ready to make common cause with the loyal North in their systems of education and laws and religion, when their citizens are ready to sacrifice their lives in support of the Union as the North has done for the last four years, then and not till then would I allow them to return. (Applause.) It has been said that the great contest has been between Massachusetts and South Carolina. Be it so. And as Massachusetts has carried the day, I would have South Carolina submit wisely and gracefully to the consequences of the defeat. (Applause and hurrahs.)

Let us see then, if we cannot adopt some system by which our schools, and all our institutions can be planted and nurtured upon their soil. I think we can. I think the American people are equal to this issue, and that they will never be satisfied until the Federal arm is stretched over the revolted states, holding them firmly in obedience, in its powerful grasp, until they shall have learned the lesson of freedom, which the North has furnished them. This would give us a government and a country worth having, worth living for and worth dying for. Accomplish this, and we can say that we have carried our country safely through this field of blood, and firmly established the great principles for which this war has been fought; and that we have proved ourselves not only brave in battle, but in peace and in war a Christian, and high-toned and moral people. For the accomplishment of this, there must be a period of pupilage, in which the social transformation may go on in safety to those who have been hitherto oppressed—in which the down-trodden there may work up to the standard of freedom—and in which they will acquire ability to defend themselves, when their freedom and social position shall be perfected. And during this

period of pupilage let us exercise such military sway as will secure the great objects of the war.

My friends, I have often said, in view of the distressing events of these times, that I was born either too early or too late; but if in my day the regeneration of this people and nation shall be perfected, and they shall prove themselves to be valiant in the field, and wise, religious, Christian in council and aims, I shall feel that I was born in a blessed hour. It is indeed amazing to see how the people have been elevated by the contest, it is marvellous how self-sacrificing and courageous and lofty they have become under its trials and responsibilities. They have been equal to the occasion. When, therefore, I am warned that a free exercise of their powers is dangerous and subversive;—that no safety can exist in a community where the ballot is free, I can turn with pride and satisfaction to this chapter in the history of popular government. I have entire faith in the people, in the free ballot as an instrument of power which the people shall use, and use well in deciding all the great questions of the day. I know that these questions will be judged and settled in our homes and schoolhouses and pulpits—the very places of all others where they should be brought to judgment. And I have yet to see or read of the event in which the ruling and inevitable question of the day, the issue of the time, the controlling thought of the hour has not met with a response in the popular heart. There is a great, almost unknown, inestimable power, that sends truth into the hearts of the people; and the grander the truth the more quickly will their instincts run to it. The history of the war teaches us this lesson also. It is on this estimate of popular intelligence and right, that we of the North have established the exercise of free ballot—of universal suffrage. There is no distinction here among citizens; no one is deprived of the right to cast his ballot, if he pays his taxes and can read the law. Why should there be any other condition of affairs at the South? And above all things, should there be no discrimination against those who have toiled so faithfully for us and our cause. Shall not they at least exercise the right which they have defended—without distinction of race or complexion? I have yet to learn what living, mortal, conceivable attribute there is wrapped up in a man's skin, that shall prevent him from voting, if he shall pay his taxes and read his spelling book.—(Great applause.) I do not believe there is any danger in it. But I do believe that by the extension of the free ballot, and by that alone the permanency and security of our free institutions, will be secured. (Applause.) It is not written that this great war shall close with a great injustice undressed. It is not written in the heavens that the American people shall now, at the end of this strife, commit another great wrong. And the strife will never cease until it shall be established that the principles of the Declaration are, and shall ever be, the law of the land. Those men who have fought side by side with us in this war, who have perished on our hard-fought fields, and in our trenches, and who have guided our captured soldiers through the intricate paths of the enemy's country into the open air of freedom, always faithful, never flinching, must and shall now enjoy the privileges of free men. When you have established your government on this basis, then

will the desire of your fathers be fulfilled and realized. Then will you have the Constitution which Washington and Jefferson proposed. Then will you stand before all nations of the earth, free indeed. Then will your power extend with benignant influence over this whole land. Then will the American people stand in the front rank of the nations, leading them on with the principles of free popular education and law, which they have laid down and fixed by this strife.

My friends, I hardly know how or when or by whom, the history of this great struggle shall be written. No man living to-day can write it as it should be. The events of the times have swept us on, and have carried our rulers along, until the mind of man becomes almost powerless in its efforts to estimate the consequences. When however in the future some wise and profound historian shall look back and record this chapter on his pages, he will at least be compelled to acknowledge that never before has a people risen in its might and stricken down all political heresy, all social wrong, and moral iniquity, and obtained by an overpowering impulse that lofty eminence which an enlightened and faithful, and intelligent people ought to possess. Let us then thank God that we have lived to see this day, and do not let us flinch now that the power is in our hands. Let us do our duty here. This is not a large assembly; and yet you can have but small idea of the power of such an assembly of earnest men, gathered together for the purpose of ascertaining the truth and pressing it home to the minds of their rulers. Our country is in confusion. The ideas of those who are to guide us through this crisis are yet to be moulded by the presentation from every quarter, of the great all-pervading truths which have grown out of the occasion. They do not, they cannot tell you how the mass is to crystallize—this turbid liquor is yet to be thrown into that condition from which forms and shapes may be taken. From such assemblies as these may go forth courage and wisdom, to teach our rulers and guide their councils. In the views expressed here you are not alone. When I tell you that the Chief Justice of the United States will sanction no law that is not based on the eternal principles of freedom and justice, and the mind of Salmon P. Chase is devoted to the solution of the problem upon which a lasting and honorable peace can be obtained, in which no man shall be deprived of his God-given prerogatives, you will know that the Supreme Court is at last a pillar upon which every man who would be free can lean for succor and support. (Prolonged applause.) I say this because I know it; and when I tell you that the Attorney General of the United States stands upon the same platform, that the Union men of the middle states cry out for the aid of the Federal Government in opening the revolted districts to free labor and free ballot, that your own Sumner has taken this ground and will not surrender, and that the best intelligence of the land is assuming this attitude, you will then feel how cordial should be our labor in strengthening the hands of those to whom this great work has been entrusted. My friends, I have barely referred to the great question of the times. But I must yield to others who are to address you, and to whom I shall be happy to render the same patient hearing which they have accorded me.

LETTER TO THE SALEM GAZETTE.

SALEM, May 15, 1865.

Messrs. Editors:—In an interesting article in the Gazette of the 12th inst., upon the rights of the States in the Union, you object somewhat to the territorial doctrine advanced by Senator Sumner early in the war,—a doctrine which, as you say, I endeavored to defend at the meeting of the 4th, in Mechanic Hall. The importance of this doctrine, at this time, seems to me to be so great that I beg leave to occupy your columns with a few more suggestions in its favor.

I think it will hardly be denied that the revolted States not only destroyed their “practical relations” to the general government, but that in all their civil organization, they placed themselves outside of all exercise of the powers of the constitution. They organized their courts of law, they exercised their legislative functions, they elected their State and National officers, all with reference to some other power than the old government. Their post-offices and post-roads, their militia, their revenue laws, and their national taxation, were all controlled by authority unrecognized by the United States. Whether this was done by an unconstitutional act of secession, or by simply taking up arms against the Federal government, matters not. In either case the result must be the same. And Georgia, while in rebellion, and unoccupied by Federal troops, is no more an integral part of the Union, than Texas was before her annexation. Not that I recognize the right of a State to secede by an act of her legislature, or by a vote of her people. But having risen in revolution, in revolt against the Federal authority, the status which she assumed, when admitted into the Union, or when she adopted the constitution, is so broken up, that her reorganization becomes as much a duty of the Federal government, in the event of her conquest, as her organization was while she was in a territorial condition, or at the moment of her becoming a part of the Union.

A territory can only become a State by an act of Congress. A revolted State can only be restored to its place in the Union, by an act of Congress.—Congress has exercised this power in various ways, in the revolted States,—

in the division of Virginia, in the rejection of senators and representatives from Louisiana, in recognizing the military governors of States where the federal government had gained a foothold during the rebellion. The course pursued towards Gov. Vance of Georgia, and Gov. Smith of Virginia, the determination not to recognize the State authorities, which have been clothed with power by a rebellious people in civil war, are significant of the necessity which now rests upon the general government, and very probably, in the minds of those dignitaries, bring them about as near the condition of territories, as will be of practical service to the government, and after overthrow to themselves.

If, on the breaking out of the war, the people and the government of the United States could have foreseen the majestic power with which they were to march on to victory complete and overwhelming, would they have hesitated a moment in declaring that the revolted States should be resolved into their original elements, and should be reconstructed by the power which should subdue them? Has not every departure from this great principle grown out of a fear of failure? It was hard, in the beginning, for even the most faithful and sanguine to predict the grandeur of our success—the astonishing triumphs of our armies—the gallant protection of our flag on the high seas—the masterly management of our finances—that dignified attitude by which we have kept foreign powers in check. Nor could the most enthusiastic and devoted lover of his race have foretold, that a government which commenced a war with the avowed determination of preserving intact *all the institutions* of this country, good and bad, would in four years come out of the struggle, elevated to the highest standard of Humanity and civilization. To the Senator, who, whether he foresaw all this or not, never faltered in his high aim of keeping the people and the government up to the grand issue of the hour, and in his endeavor to establish a policy commensurate with brilliant opportunity which the most complete victory would bring, I think the gratitude of all lovers of freedom throughout the world is due.

Whether we call South Carolina, and Georgia, and Alabama, and Mississippi, and Virginia, and those other "wayward sisters," territories or not, one thing is certain, and that is that they now rest in the hands of the general government, and it is for Congress to declare when and how they shall resume their places in the Union. Virginia, under act of Congress, makes two very good States: I am not sure that North and South Carolina could not be joined into one, with equal advantage. It is by Congress that the work of reconstruction is to be carried on, a work of more importance than any which has yet been imposed upon it. It is for them to perfect the great work begun upon the battle-field, and to secure to the American people the reward for all their devotion and sacrifice. Representatives of free and loyal States, it is for them alone to carry freedom and loyalty, into those places made waste by the desolation which has followed in the wake of slavery and treason. This duty they cannot delegate to others. To leave it to the hunted and fugitive loyalists of the South, is to mock their febleness and insignificance. To leave it to repentant rebels, is to resign the opportunity forever. In whatever way this duty is to be performed, whether by the appointment of military governors, or

by officers elected by a few loyal voters, whether by civil organizations called States or territories, it all comes back upon Congress, whose acts of reconstruction, confirmed by the Supreme Court, can alone give us our entire country once more.

In all this I see no danger, but safety and honor to our nation rather. We have a Congress now elected for the purpose of extending free institutions and perpetuating them; a Congress representing the highest purposes of a high-toned, elevated, moral, and free people, a Congress which, if true to all its obligations, must wipe every vestige of slavery from the land, and carry free northern prosperity, and education, and suffrage, into that region which set at defiance every advancing thought of the age. And it cannot be that with the lesson of the last four years in their minds, the American people will ever absolve their representatives from these high obligations, until the work is fully accomplished. We have a Supreme Court now, whose distinguished Chief has shown, in another sphere, how well he comprehended the necessities of the times, and whose whole life gives us an assurance that constitutional law will now rest upon the foundations of freedom and justice, and will be interpreted in accordance with those principles of government, which we have secured by undying devotion to the Federal authority. We have a President now, who knows the heresies and the wrongs, out of which the rebellion sprang, and whose education and instincts would guide him in our new path of national trials, to an eminence as illustrious as that won by his predecessor while he opened the way to higher national glories.

I am apt to believe that our nation has entered upon a new career of greatness, a career which will be untrammeled by the difficulties and trials of the past, whatever may be its dangers and trials in the future. I think the States have learned at last what their proper place is under the government. I think they have learned that the constitution and the laws enacted under it are the supreme law of the land; and that in learning this lesson they have lost none of those functions by which they have always controlled their own internal economy, for the peace, good order, and elevation of their people. I trust they have learned also that free-citizenship for all races of men is to be hereafter the unalterable law of the American people, and that every revolted State shall be held in territorial subserviency to the General Government, until she is ready to adopt this policy as her own.

Respectfully yours, etc.,

GEORGE B. LORING.



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